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African-Americans and Social Policy in the 1990's

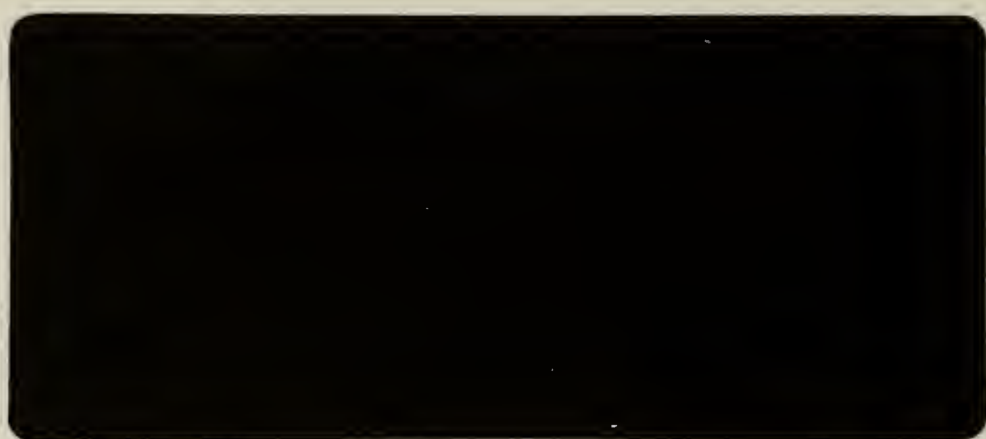
Wornie L. Reed

OCCASIONAL PAPER

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UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AT BOSTON

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125-3393



**African-Americans and Social Policy in the 1990's**

**Wornie L. Reed**

**Director, William Monroe Trotter Institute**

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The basic social policy issue for African-Americans in the next decade will be a perennial objective—to have policies instituted that will bring them into the economic and social mainstreams of America. The main problems currently faced by blacks are quite familiar: inequalities in economic and social conditions. The new wrinkle in the 1980s is a downturn in racial progress, a downturn that is seen whether one is examining attitudes or specific social policies.


Racial divisions have increased sharply. The Reagan Administration's war against affirmative action, its refusal to allow access to decision-making by minorities, its fight against civil rights legislation, and its often demeaning acts and statements about the poor, have created bitterness among blacks and encouraged racists in the white community (Jacobs, 1989, p.2).

Against this backdrop, constructing the particular dimensions of policies to deal with the situation of blacks in contemporary America is complicated. This paper discusses issues in economics, education, housing and health, and considers some factors related to developing relevant social policies.

## **POVERTY, EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME**

Poverty among blacks and whites has increased in the 1980s. Some eight million more people were poor in 1987 than a decade earlier. Two million of these new poor are blacks, blacks are three times as likely as whites to be poor, and nearly half of all black children live in poverty (Jacobs, 1989).

These shocking trends cannot be attributed to single female-headed families, to the refusal of "lazy" blacks to work or to generous welfare benefits that discourage work force participation. The facts say otherwise: Compared with a decade ago, when black poverty rates were lower, black unemployment rates are



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the same and the percentage of the black poor living in female-headed families is lower.

On all key measures the economic situation of black Americans continues to lag far behind that of white Americans. In 1986, the median income of black families was only 57.1 percent of that of white families. This was up only slightly from the 51.1 percent rate in 1947, and down from rates in the middle 70's when black family income was occasionally as much as 60 percent of whites (Simms, 1988).

A majority of black Americans in a 1987 survey identified unemployment as one of the three most important public policy issues facing the nation—and for good reason. By 1987 the nation's economy had been steadily expanding for five years, but the unemployment rate for blacks nationwide was 13 percent—almost 2 1/2 times the unemployment rate for whites, which was 5.3 percent (Simms, 1988).

Black unemployment rates have averaged about twice the rates for whites since the end of World War II. Until the mid- 1970's the ratio of black to white unemployment had tended to rise when the economy contracted and fall when the economy expanded. Since 1976, however, the ratio has tended to rise rather than fall each time the economic expanded. In other words, the gap between black unemployment and white unemployment increased when the economy improved.

The growing unemployment rates of black males reflect to some degree the changes in the nature of the U.S. economy. Between 1940 and 1975 the job opportunities within manufacturing were a major means for black families to move up into the middle-income bracket, as that is the sector that has traditionally provided high wage jobs to workers with low levels of skills. However, the shift from a manufacturing economy to a service economy is having an adverse effect on current and future prospects for black workers. First, blacks are not well represented in the occupations that are expected to grow the fastest over the next decade. Also, the manufacturing sector has been declining, and predictably, black employment





fell considerably faster during the 1980s than overall employment in most of these declining industries (Simms, 1988).

The Joint Center for Political Studies' Economic Policy Task Force described four major obstacles to black economic advancement (Simms, 1988):

1. The failure of the economy to generate a sufficient number of jobs for all those willing to work;
2. Changes in the nation's industrial structure, which reduced the number of high-paying jobs relative to low-paying jobs for workers without a college education;
3. The limited productivity of many black workers due to inadequate education and training and to chronic health problems; and
4. Continuing discrimination within the job market.

### **The Black Middle Class**

The continuing importance of race is reflected in all the ways the black middle class suffers in comparison to its white counterpart. First, it is smaller in proportion to the total black population than is the white middle class. Second, it is skewed much more toward a lower than an upper middle class status. Even in professional occupations, blacks tend to be in the lower paying, lower prestige fields, although there have been impressive increases in the number of blacks going into law and medicine since 1978. Third, the black middle class family, even more than the white, depends on two wage earners. The contribution of the wife's paycheck is especially important. A higher proportion of married black women work than white women, and their average earnings more nearly equals their husbands' than is true in the white family (Pinkney, 1988).



With a more precarious economic status, the black middle class is highly vulnerable to economic downturns and government budget cuts. During the 1970s, the proportion of black workers in the public sector increased from 21 to 27 percent, while government employment for whites was decreasing to 16 percent. The black middle class is also vulnerable to changes in affirmative action policy to the extent that affirmative action policy becomes weaker. The number of blacks moving into the middle class becomes less. Thus the black middle class does not have resources equal to that of the white middle class for transmitting its favored class position to its children. Part of this is financial: the net worth of the average black family in 1984 was only \$3,400 compared to \$39,000 for whites. But part of it is situational: many blacks with middle class credentials still live in black neighborhoods where they cannot always protect their children from the atmosphere of the streets, the pressure of peers and the inadequacies of the schools (Pinkney, 1988).

## EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>

There is a pattern emerging in American higher education that threatens access to education and therefore to social mobility for black Americans. Since 1960 there has been a definite and significant attainment of educational opportunity as a result of the desegregation movement. For almost two decades colleges and universities were opening admission to substantial numbers of "minority" students. However, the data show a process of reversal as previous gains in education have been eroding over the last decade. Though the factors influencing this development are mostly systemic due to demographic, social, economic, and policy trends, the consequence has a differential racial impact.

After coming to near parity in 1977 the gap between the rates at which black and white students go on to college began to gradually widen. By 1982 the gap was





accelerating in size, creating an ever widening "Access Gap" between black and white students. According to data from the American Council on Education, members of minority groups now make up twenty one percent of the American population but only seventeen percent of college enrollment. However, the patterns vary widely by race. In 1976 there were 1,691,000 minority students in two and four-year colleges, representing 15.4 percent of all students. By 1984 the figure had risen to 2,063,000 or 17 percent of the total. Black enrollment reached its peak in 1976, when 1,032,000 Black students made up 9.4 percent of the college population. By 1984 there were 1,070,000 Black students, but they were only 8.8 percent of the total. Between 1976 and 1985, the high-school graduation rate of black students rose from 67 to 76 percent, while the college going rate of those graduates fell from 36 to 26 percent. Conversely, the high school drop-out rate decreased from 22 percent in 1970 to 12 percent in 1983.

The decline in the rate of college enrollment of blacks is occurring in the face of rising college entrance test efficiency by black students. Recent data from the College Board indicates that the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) scores for black students increased by its largest margin—twenty-one points, between 1977 and 1987.

The figures for students in graduate schools are even more depressed. Black students are critically under-represented in graduate and professional schools; their enrollment in post-graduate education has dropped since the early 1970s. There has been a nationwide decline from twenty-one thousand full-time black students in 1972 to eighteen thousand in 1984. Blacks are graduating from high school in record numbers, but proportionately fewer of them are gaining access to colleges.

Among the most salient factors accounting for the dramatic reduction of blacks (particularly young males) in American higher education are "... rising tuition, declining federal student assistance, reduced social and political pressure for affirmative action and lack of aggressive recruiting by college admissions staffs."





Though all these factors are relevant, the most important issue may be financial support. Black youth are more likely to need financial assistance to enable them to enroll in college. In the 18 years of age and under cohort, nearly half live in households below the poverty line, in contrast to seventeen percent of white youth. Most colleges and universities have reduced financial assistance, explaining that they cannot afford to do otherwise because of the shortage in government support for education, which has seen federal aid to post-secondary students drop substantially since 1980.

## RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION

More than in any other aspect of American society, racial discrimination in housing has not changed very much. Historically, white Americans have refused to live in the same buildings and neighborhoods as blacks, and in some cases they have refused to permit blacks to live peacefully in the same cities, towns and even counties.

Housing discrimination along with the national urbanization of blacks has led to what some call the development of black "ghettos." According to Kenneth Clark, the dark ghetto's invisible walls have been created by the white society, by those who have power, both to confine those who have no power and to perpetuate their powerlessness." He continues, "The dark ghettos, are social, political, educational, and, above all, economic colonies. Their inhabitants are subject peoples, victims of the greed, cruelty, insensitivity, (and) guilt..." (Clark, 1965, p. 11).

Similarly, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, which was established after the widespread destruction accompanying rebellions in black communities throughout the United States in the mid 1960s, reported in 1968 that "What white Americans have never understood, but what the Negro can never



forget is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it" (Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968, p.2).

The federal government has been involved in housing for nearly half a century, and throughout most of that time the policies of the government supported segregation and discrimination against minorities. It was not until 1962 that minimal steps were taken to curb these practices. Currently, the Government, measured by its action during the past administration, appears to be engaged in an effort to dismantle the very legal and programmatic structure by which the fragile foundation of fair housing has been painfully built over the past three decades (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1983, p. 134).

Discrimination in housing remains pervasive. It is widespread in the rental and sales of housing; in urban and suburban regions, and in public and private housing. Although President Reagan signed a bill in 1986 that strengthened the enforcement of laws banning housing discrimination, the federal government has been far from diligent in addressing itself to housing discrimination. The Departments of Housing and Urban Development, and Justice are responsible for compliance with fair housing laws, but neither agency has effectively enforced the laws.

Evidence indicates that the residential segregation of blacks is increasing, and that they live increasingly in all-black neighborhoods. Between 1950 and 1970, blacks in neighborhoods in 20 large cities where they represented three-fourths of the population increased from 30 to 51 percent, while the proportion of blacks in mixed neighborhoods with 25 percent or less blacks declined from 25 to 16 percent (Levitan, et al 1973, p. 227).

One of the few empirical measures of discrimination in housing is the segregation index. Developed by Karl E. Taeuber and Alma F. Taeuber, the index can



be used to measure increases or decreases in housing segregation over time and to compare cities and regions of the country.

The index has been computed for several decades, although the number of cities included in each period varies. The following presents data on the national segregation index from 1940 through 1980 (Taeuber and Taeuber, p. 44; Taeuber 1983):

1940	.....	85.2
1950	.....	87.3
1960	.....	86.1
1970	.....	87.0
1980	.....	81.0

As these data indicate, discrimination in housing is widespread, and there appears to be little promise for substantially reducing it in the near future. One writer has suggested that with the 6-point drop in the average segregation index for urban areas in the decade of the 1970's, "It will take another half century to desegregate these cities. Some cities, such as Chicago, St. Louis, and Washington will take centuries to be fully desegregated" (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1983, p. 144).

## **LIFE AND DEATH**

Racial disadvantages in the United States --- especially as they relate to blacks in comparison to whites --- is nowhere more telling and perhaps more significant than in mortality rates and life expectancy. Blacks do not live as long as whites. In fact, the National Center for Health Statistics recently reported that in 1986 life expectancy for blacks declined for the second year in a row--the first back-to-back







annual decline in the century. The black rate declined to 69.4 years, while the white rate increased to a record high of 75.4 years.

Blacks are at higher risk of death throughout the life span, except at very advanced ages. One means of expressing these racial differentials in mortality is the "excess deaths" index. This index expresses the difference between the number of deaths actually observed among blacks and the number of deaths that would have occurred if blacks had experienced the same death rates for each age and sex as the white population. During the period 1979 to 1981, for black males and females combined, excess deaths accounted for 47 percent of the total annual deaths in blacks 45 years old or less, and for 42 percent of deaths in blacks aged 70 years or less.

Another measure used to illustrate racial differentials in mortality is "person-years of life lost," which incorporates the impact of the age of death on black/white differences. Results indicate that among black men, over 900,000 years of life before age 70 are lost each year in excess of the person-years lost by white men. Among black females nearly 600,000 excess person-years are lost annually in excess of the loss among white females. (Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Black and Minority Health, 1986a). If blacks had the same death rates as whites, 59,000 black deaths a year would not occur (Miller, 1989).

## **WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

### **Race-Specific Solutions**

Obviously, solutions to these problems may not be simple or easy, but it is clear that policies should be developed to produce better access by blacks to the goods and services of the society. And I would argue that having a color-blind society is not the way to do it.



Although one can readily understand the desires of some persons to minimize racial strife, ignoring a person's race is an inappropriate means of accomplishing that objective. In a personal relations sense, failing to notice a person's race is not an example of "not being racist." Where vast differences in wealth, power, opportunity and chances of survival separate the races, failure to acknowledge those differences means that nothing will be done to abolish them. A color-blind social policy in a racist society simply guarantees that racism will be strengthened and perpetuated instead of eradicated.

I would also argue that it may be misleading to ignore race in examining some social issues. Take for example the infant mortality rate. It is one of the most critical indices used nationally and internationally to interpret the status of a population group. The national infant mortality rate has been steadily decreasing: between 1970 and 1985 the rate was cut in half. In fact, it is reasonably close to the one percent rate that was established as a policy objective for the 1980s decade.

Yet the black infant mortality rate is nearly twice the white rate. While the white rate in 1985 was 9.3 deaths per 1000 live births, the black rate was 18.2 deaths per 1000 live births. Another way of stating this is that some 6,000 black infants who die each year would be living if the infant mortality rate observed for black infants in a geographic region was as low as that for white infants in the same region (Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Black and Minority Health, 1986b).

Although both white and black infant mortality rates have decreased substantially over the period between 1950 and 1985, the gap between black and white rates has increased. In 1950 the black infant mortality rate exceeded the white rate by less than two-thirds; however, in 1985 the black rate exceeded the white rate by almost 100 percent. One of the primary factors related to infant mortality is socio-economic status; however, there is a race effect over and above the class effect. In fact, the highest SES blacks have higher rates of infant mortality than the





lowest SES whites. Moreover, blacks with some college education have higher rates of infant mortality than whites with no more than an eighth-grade education (Reed, 1989).

There is currently an ongoing social policy debate about how to improve the situation of black Americans. On one side is the argument for universality or comprehensiveness; and on the other side is the argument for targeting or means-testing (Miller, 1989). Universal or comprehensive programs would be available to everyone, or almost everyone, like Social Security and Medicare. The targeting principle sets out conditions, usually income inadequacy, that must be met in order to receive benefits. Medicaid is an example of this type of program.

The advantage argued on behalf of universality is that it produces social solidarity; it causes groups to join with each other in support of a program rather than dividing groups against each other. Additionally, it avoids the stigmatization of beneficiaries that usually come with means-tested programs. The negative side of the universality argument is that if everyone is served, there is an inevitable diffusion of program resources, which reduces the ability of a program to aid those most in need.

The assumption of the targeting principle is that targeting benefits provides greater resources to those most in need. The downside of targeting is that programs that are seen as being for the poor, the so-called "underclass," and blacks in general face political, financial, and operational obstacles. These are the programs that are most likely to be cut. A comparison between a universal program like Social Security and a targeted program like Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) is quite illustrative of this point. In the 1970s and 1980s Social Security payments more than kept up with inflation, while AFDC payments suffered losses (Miller, 1989).

S. Miller (1989) has addressed this dilemma and has argued that the two approaches should be joined. Universal programs would be the first line of defense.





In other words, the needs of the black low-income population would be included as part of efforts to improve the situation of all or most poor Americans. When this principle is inadequate, then targeting within the universal program would be desirable and effective. In practice then, both universality and targeting would be utilized. The issues would be when and how; not universal or selective.

The Joint Center for Political Studies' Economic Policy Task Force considered several current and future policy areas that could have an effect on the employment and income of blacks. Among these are macroeconomic policy, equal employment opportunity, and education, employment and training. In their policy recommendations they combine the universal and targeting principles. This group recommended the establishment of a macroeconomic policy that would be aimed at increasing the average rate of economic growth in order to expand the number of employment opportunities available, relying here on the fact that in times of rapid economic growth, blacks have made significant advancements in employment and relative income.

On the other hand, they argue for the government to develop incentives to induce the growing sectors of the economy to employ black workers and to promote policies to make it easier for displaced workers to transfer to new jobs in these industries. Also, they advocate a return to vigorous pursuit of affirmative action policies. This is indeed needed, because discrimination continues to operate in the labor market. Demonstration of this is quite evident in the disparities in employment and earnings between blacks and whites with similar education and experience.

### **"Legal-class"-Specific Solution**

Many sociologists who do not think of themselves as working on social policy issues may not see a role for them in any of the issues raised herein. Consequently, I



would like to turn briefly to some related issues that I think are central sociological issues.

In the *Mobile v. Bolden* case in 1980, the United States Supreme Court established a standard that required proof of an intent to discriminate (in school desegregation cases). This role of intention in discrimination was supported by the U.S. Supreme Court again in 1982. This situation suggested two points: one is that the legal process is limited in bringing about desired social change; the other is the necessity for social scientists, especially sociologists, to add to the public discussion the idea that social processes occur regardless of individual intentions. In other words, racist processes cannot always (and need not always be explained by individual psychologies (psychological reductionism).

On the one hand we have the Supreme Court requiring some demonstration of intent to violate a law before the process can be deemed illegal. On the other hand, sociologists argue that if racist consequences accrue to institutional laws, customs, or practices, the institution is racist whether or not the individuals maintaining those practices have racist intentions. The Kerner Commission Report in 1968 supported this definition of racism. Thus, we appear to have the law in contradiction with acknowledged situations.

Of course, institutionalized law---and the Supreme Court--- follow social practice. Therefore, social scientists should consider these issues for at least two reasons. One is because this is proper subject matter for social scientists. The other reason is to influence the "public knowledge," so that the laws might reflect the understanding of social practice.

Another example of the problem that this "intent" requirement posed was illustrated by the debate in 1982 over the extension of the Voting Rights Act. It appeared that if the Act had been extended in its previous form it would have had very little effect because it would have been subject to the 1980 Supreme Court





Decision that required evidence of intentional discrimination. Civil Rights groups favored the House version of the Voting Rights Act because it required that plaintiffs show only that a local government action "results" in a denial or abridgement of voting rights. Since a key aspect of social behavior is the insignificance of intent it would appear that social scientists should have been more involved in this debate.

Although the Supreme Court was using the "intent" measure in some discrimination areas, three federal appeals courts had endorsed the "effects" tests to prove housing discrimination and no appeals court had ruled against it. Prior to the Reagan Administration, Justice Department lawyers used the so-called "effects test." That test permits the department to attempt to prove housing discrimination merely by showing that decisions of local government had the effect of discriminating regardless of whether the government actually intended to do so. However, the Reagan administration instructed Justice Department lawyers not to use the test. With the absence of any significant and informed protestations from social scientists, the administration was on the way to redefining discrimination such that it may be thought of in terms of legal technicalities rather than social facts.

Fortunately, the Congress extended the Voting Rights Act with new guidelines that make it possible to establish a fact of voting rights discrimination using the "results test." My concern about this, even though it turned out satisfactorily, is the relative lack of participation in this debate by sociologists.

Currently, and maybe no so as subtly, the anti-affirmative action lobby is winning the day in defining the parameters of this issue. The Reagan Administration—including the Rehnquist Court—has successfully redefined racism as individual discrimination. There is little consideration of institutional racism, and indirectly, remedies are applied to the individuals, not to groups, nor to legal classes.

I would hope that social scientists, especially sociologists become more involved in the public debate.





## END NOTES

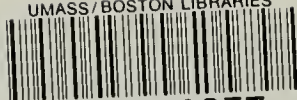
<sup>1</sup>This section is based substantially on A Pinkney, (1988) Sociocultural Change and Continuity, Unpublished Manuscript.

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